

WHAT THE CROSS REVEALS
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Matthew 27: 27-54 (NEB)

Pilate's soldiers then took Jesus into the Governor's headquarters, where they collected the whole company round him. They stripped him and dressed him in a scarlet mantle; and plaiting a crown of thorns they placed it on his head, with a cane in his right hand. Falling on their knees before him they jeered at him: "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him and used the cane to beat him about the head. When they had finished their mockery, they took off the mantle and dressed him in his own clothes.

Then they led him to be crucified. On their way out they met a man from Cyrene, Simon by name, and pressed him into service to carry his cross.

So they came to a place called Golgotha (which means "Place of a skull") and there he was offered a draught of wine mixed with gall; but when he tasted it he would not drink.

After fastening him to the cross they divided his clothes among them by casting lots, and then sat down there to keep watch. Over his head was placed the inscription giving the charge: "This is Jesus the king of the Jews."

Two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and the other on his left.

The passers-by hurled abuse at him: they wagged their heads and cried, "You would pull the temple down, would you, and build it in three days? Come, down from the cross and save yourself, if you are indeed the Son of God." So too the chief priests with the lawyers and elders mocked at him: "He saved others," they said, "but he cannot save himself. King of Israel, indeed! Let him come down now from the cross, and then we will believe him. Did he trust God? Let God rescue him, if he wants him – for he said he was God's Son." Even the bandits who were crucified with him taunted him in the same way.

From midday a darkness fell over the whole land, which lasted until three in the afternoon; and about three Jesus cried aloud, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?", which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Some of the bystanders, on hearing this said, "He is calling Elijah." One of them ran at once and fetched a sponge, which was soaked in sour wine, and held it to his lips on the end of a cane. But the others said, "Let us see if Elijah will come and save him."

Jesus again gave a loud cry, and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. There was an earthquake, the rocks split and the graves opened, and many of God's saints were raised from sleep; and coming out of their graves after his resurrection they entered the Holy City, where many saw them. And when the centurion and his men who were keeping watch over Jesus saw the earthquake and all that was happening, they were filled with awe, and they said, "Truly this man was a son of God."

I often think about how wrong the Christian church is on so many issues, especially during the highest holy season of Holy Week and Resurrection Sunday. It reminds me of so many church bulletin “bloopers,” such as these.

Scouts are saving aluminum cans, bottles, and other items to be recycled. Proceeds will be used to cripple children.

The outreach committee has enlisted 25 visitors to make calls on people who are not afflicted with any church.

The Pastor would appreciate it if the ladies of the congregation would lend him their electric girdles for the pancake breakfast next Sunday morning.

The audience is asked to remain seated until the end of the recession.

The Low Self-Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7:00 p.m. Please use the back door.

For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.

The pastor will preach his farewell message, after which the choir will sing, "Break Forth Into Joy."

Due to the Rector's illness, Wednesday's healing services will be discontinued until further notice.

Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.

The eighth-graders will be presenting Shakespeare's Hamlet in the church basement on Friday at 7 p.m. The congregation is invited to attend this tragedy.

Potluck supper: Prayer and medication to follow.

And my favorite one: Don't let worry kill you off - let the church help.

Most of us grew up with what is called “substitutionary atonement.” This is a major church blooper. A theologian named Anselm first inflicted this idea upon the church. His theory begins with the idea that human beings have alienated themselves

from God by the actions of Adam and Eve that we call “the fall.” By disobedience, lying, and blaming, that first couple violated God and created an unjust relationship between God and humanity. Now because we have fallen from God’s grace we are not capable of restoring the relationship. God is the injured party and we are either too wicked or too weak to restore a right relationship with the Holy One. The only reconciling power capable of restoration is God’s. Only God can render satisfaction and the sacrifice necessary. Therefore, God sends the God-Man, Jesus Christ, to render the ultimate sacrifice. This is the basic concept that is also found under different titles with some shift in nuance and meaning. You may have heard it called “Ransom” or “Debt” atonement, “Penal Substitution,” or the “Satisfactory theory of atonement.” The popular expression, “Christ died for your sins,” means basically that Jesus paid the cost of human restoration to God by his crucifixion. The sins of all human beings are satisfied or “forgiven” by this gesture. This implies, of course, that the whole mission and purpose of Jesus was death upon the cross. It was the will and plan of God. The stories by and about Jesus, and the parables that he left to us are fine, but his real ministry was the shedding of his blood and death on the cross for our sins.

I understand that a large number of Christians around the world believe this theology in one form or another. It is certainly not my intent to ridicule them. But I do not believe this theology for one moment. It is fraught with many questionable assumptions and it is contrary to my faith in a loving and compassionate God.

Anselm’s theology begins with the premise that because of the actions of one couple God is alienated from all human beings for all of time. All human beings since

Adam are therefore contaminated by this fall from grace and only worthy of future alienation and punishment. Really? Without a doubt Genesis declares that Adam and Eve had a falling out with God. They lost their place in the Garden of Eden. But Genesis does not declare that they are permanently removed from the presence of God, or that death is the result of their sin, or that all of humanity is condemned by their actions. Paul might have thought that. Augustine certainly did. But this idea is totally inconsistent with the rest of the Hebrew Bible and a flat out contradiction of the New Testament claim that “God is love.”

The balance of the Hebrew Bible also vitiates the idea that God requires some kind of blood ransom. God rejected the sacrifice of Isaac and the prophet Amos declared, “I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them. Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings.” (5:21-22) What God wants from us is not the blood or death of animals or humans. God wants only one thing from us – justice and right relationships with one another. Reconciliation with God does not come at the murder of an innocent Jew from Galilee. Reconciliation with God, or salvation if you want to use another word, comes in the process of women and men treating one another fairly, equitably, generously, and compassionately.

Yes, when we seek to be in right relationships with one another, when we try to live our lives with utmost charity we sometimes make sacrifices. Sometimes people die in the service of other people. There are many parents who make sacrifices to provide for their children by working two or three jobs a day. History is filled with thinkers and scientists who made sacrifices for truth, people like Galileo, Joseph

Priestly, and Charles Darwin. We remember the sacrifices that Father Emil Kapaun from Kansas made for soldiers during World War II and the Korean War. He repeatedly risked his life to recover wounded soldiers from the battlefield. While a prisoner of war in Korea he stole food to provide for malnourished soldiers. He picked the lice from their heads. He did everything in his power to bring them comfort and raise morale. He died at the age of 35 as a POW in 1951.

Yes, love, compassion, justice, and righteousness often demand sacrifices from us all. That does not equate to mean that God intends that someone be killed to achieve the Kingdom. I do not believe that the cross of Jesus appeases the anger or alienation that God may feel about human sin. I do believe that the cross of Jesus does reveal a God who is willing to suffer the sacrifices that love and freedom inevitably command. Let me spell out what the cross reveals to me.

The cross reveals to me the injustices that are often perpetrated on innocent people when religion and the state collude in the grasp for power. History is filled with examples when the church or the state assumes the role and authority of the other. I think of the collusion between the churches of the south and the Jim Crow laws that maintained segregation. The Third Reich of Adolph Hitler and the German Evangelical Church, which became the Protestant Reich Church, were partners in the extermination of the Jews.

Evidence has emerged in the past decade of the role that some Catholic priests and nuns played in the genocide in Rwanda. In an article written in 2005, Tom Ndahiro, a human rights commissioner in Rwanda, wrote an article exposing the long history of Catholic manipulation of racial identity and creating divisions between the

Hutus and Tutsis. He wrote that schools and seminaries helped disseminate racial theories, and that from 1959 these were angled towards keeping the Hutus in power. Instead of speaking out against discrimination and injustice, the church became complicit with the political regime. In trials during the early part of the 21st century priests and nuns were convicted of actively participating in the genocide.¹

The cross reveals that when a religious institution, including the Christian Church, confuses its power and responsibility with the sake innocent people die.

The cross reveals that the status quo is intolerant of and will crucify any challenge to its accepted levels of comfort. The status quo means what we have always believed, the way we have always done things around here, who gets to make decisions, who is in and who is out. Ken Keyes, Jr. writes about this in his book, *The 100th Monkey*. Keyes wrote:

Start with a cage containing five monkeys.

In the cage, hang a banana on a string and put stairs under it. Before long, a monkey will go to the stairs and start to climb towards the banana.

As soon as he touches the stairs, spray all of the monkeys with cold water.

After a while, another monkey will make an attempt with the same response - all of the monkeys are sprayed with cold water. Keep this up for several days.

Turn off the cold water.

If, later, another monkey tries to climb the stairs, the other monkeys will try to prevent it even though no water sprays them.

Now, remove one monkey from the cage and replace it with a new one.

¹ Go to <http://iwpr.net/report-news/rwanda-church-role-genocide-under-scrutiny>.

The new monkey sees the banana and wants to climb the stairs. To his horror, all of the other monkeys attack him. After another attempt and attack, he knows that if he tries to climb the stairs, he will be assaulted.

Next, remove another of the original five monkeys and replace it with a new one. The newcomer goes to the stairs and is attacked. The previous newcomer takes part in the punishment with enthusiasm.

Replace the third original monkey with a new one. The new one makes it to the stairs and is attacked as well. Two of the four monkeys that beat him have no idea why they were not permitted to climb the stairs, or why they are participating in the beating of the newest monkey.

After replacing the fourth and fifth original monkeys, all the monkeys which have been sprayed with cold water have been replaced. Nevertheless, no monkey ever again approaches the stairs.

Why not?

"Because that's the way it's always been done around here."²

Despite the fact that the banana is nutritious food the status quo prevents healthful change. The new monkeys in the cage have no experience of the cold water. They really do not know why they cannot eat the banana. The culture of their community has ingrained in them that the dangling banana is forbidden fruit.

When you look at the countless number of women and men who were branded as heretics and faced exile, ridicule, or even death be reminded that they violated the status quo to some measure. They upset the way the church or the community has always thought about things. The logic or truthfulness of their ideas does not matter. The problem is we don't think like that and a new idea just might mean we have to change our minds or ways of doing

² Ken Keyes, Jr., *The 100th Monkey*, at www.wowzone.com/5monkeys.html.

things. Jesus had the audacity to say that whores, tax collectors, house painters, and car salesmen were just as valuable as the preacher, the judge, and the corporate executive. Jesus said it did not matter what kind of food you put in your mouth. What was more important were the words that came out of your mouth. Jesus said that the first shall be last and the last first, not much good news for social climbers. Jesus said that women and children were valuable and should be cherished. And he said that we ought not to judge each other because such words only condemn ourselves. Jesus dared to say that our worldview is too small and that God has a bigger vision for humanity.

The cross reveals the death that follows in the wake of church and state corruption. The cross reveals how deadly the status quo can be for those who think creatively. The cross reveals that God is not ashamed of human suffering, sacrifice, and even death. If we believe at any level that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” we can only conclude that God is engaged in the work, suffering, and even dying that is required to bring wholeness to human beings. If Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, Immanuel, or the Prince of Peace, we can only conclude that God is the power willing to take the risk of failure, humiliation, and struggle that just might bring shalom to the earth.

It is said that Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire, once captured a prince and his family. When they came before him, the monarch asked the prisoner, "What will you give me if I release you?" "The half of my wealth,"

was his reply. "And if I release your children?" "Everything I possess." "And if I release your wife?" "Your Majesty, I will give myself." Cyrus was so moved by his devotion that he freed them all. As they returned home, the prince said to his wife, "Wasn't Cyrus a handsome man?" With a look of deep love for her husband, she said to him, "I didn't notice. I could only keep my eyes on you- - the one who was willing to give himself for me."

That is the kind of love and sacrifice that saves our families and the human family. If the cross means anything it means that such love and commitment is a sacred movement. I remember a parishioner of many years ago named George Thompson. George's wife suffered from Alzheimer's disease that rendered her an infant. She said things that were most embarrassing to George, usually related to bodily functions. Yet George stayed with Gloria, feeding her, bathing her, changing her clothes and bedding several times a day. I am convinced that George's fatal heart attack was related to this selfless devotion to his wife. And yet he would have it no other way. He loved her and cared for her with his last breath and heartbeat.

The cross teaches me that such love is the way of God. There is no human need or condition beyond the reach of God's compassion. Indeed, such love is the very revelation that God with us – God through us. There is no sore, disease, dysfunction, or battle that God will not be engaged in. God is with us, seeking wholeness, healing, grace, and reconciliation. There is no

sacrifice that God will not make for us. Indeed, even death cannot keep us from the love of God.

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